

‘So how about we rise up at last?’ Rebellion in Tacitus and in contemporary France

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Tacitus’ account in *Annals* 1 of the mutinies in Pannonia and on the Rhine after Augustus’ death focuses more on the mutineers’ violence and the attempts to quell it, as well as the wider political context, than on the soldiers’ perspective. But while there are no other extant sources for what happened, our understanding of the mutinies may be enhanced by a comparison with a modern protest movement. Key aspects of Tacitus’ narrative are paralleled by a recent French strike, in which workers organized themselves to demand improved pay and working conditions.

In autumn 2010 I was living in Paris as a visiting student at one of France’s *Grandes Écoles*, a university-level establishment educating future civil servants. It was a time of political turbulence: demonstrations were occurring all over the country against government plans to reform the pension system and increase the retirement age. However, academic life had continued more or less as normal, until one day in October, when I looked out of my window over at the main building and realized that something was different.

A large banner was attached to the front gates, declaring *Et si enfin on s’insurgeait?* (‘So how about we rise up at last?’). Other placards announced that a strike had been called and that the *École* had been blockaded to highlight the poor working conditions of its non-academic staff. Soon afterwards, a group gathered in the road outside. Someone began to make a rousing speech, proclaiming how many problems the workforce faced, and asserting that they needed to make a stand.

It turned out that a new, local movement had arisen out of the national campaign. The strikers, both students and employees, piled up furniture and blocked access to the administrative offices, canteen, and library. They were protesting about low salaries, as well as the fact that most staff were employed on temporary contracts, which made it difficult for them to obtain housing and credit. It was also alleged that some had been physically and psychologically harassed. Over the next few days

there were other meetings, in which enthusiastic speakers urged further action. The strikers clearly saw themselves as potential revolutionaries, as heirs to the famous protests of May 1968, but I was reminded of another case of industrial action.

There are some intriguing parallels between these events in Paris and Tacitus’ account in book 1 of the *Annals* of two mutinies in the Roman army. He concentrates on the authorities’ attempts to deal with the situation, and the mutineers’ own perspective is mainly sidelined. But if we use the French protests to reconstruct another side to the story he tells, we can look beyond the text and start to imagine what it was like to be a discontented Roman soldier in the first century A.D.

The changeover to Tiberius: trouble in the provinces

The *Annals*, a year-by-year account of the reigns of the Julio-Claudian emperors, begins in A.D. 14 with Augustus’ death and the accession of his stepson Tiberius, but after only a few chapters the narrative leaves Rome behind. At that time, three legions were stationed in Pannonia (now part of Hungary). Two other armies occupied large bases on the river Rhine, patrolling the frontier zone between the Romanized Gallic provinces and the potentially aggressive German tribes who lived across the river. Life far away from the empire’s warmer, more civilized centre would have been hard. Keeping off

barbarian attacks would not have won the soldiers much booty, and after thirty or more years of punishing service they could look forward only to a retirement grant of land, often of poor quality, in the region where they had been posted.

We are told first how the Pannonian legions mutinied, and then about the similar trouble in Germany. In the first case, Tacitus reports that the soldiers were released from their duties in the wake of Augustus’ death, and that this gave them time to reflect on their circumstances and make plans for mutiny. They hoped to capitalize on the change of emperor, which they thought would bring ‘opportunities for disorder and the hope of rewards from civil war’.

Tacitus highlights how their indignation was roused by the speeches of demagogic leaders. The more impressionable gathered at night to hear a man named Percennius compare their condition to slavery. He reminded them of their difficult and dangerous working conditions, their superiors’ cruelty, and their low pay, and of how legionaries often had to continue serving beyond their rightful discharge date. He urged them to take advantage of the new emperor, while his position was still uncertain, and demand fixed terms for their service. They should claim better wages, and no one should be prevented from retiring. His words were heard eagerly, and the men took action, refusing to obey orders and threatening their superiors.

The same complaints were heard in Germany. The soldiers there needed little persuasion to revolt, and began with a fierce attack on their centurions, hurling the dead or wounded officers into the Rhine. They formed an intimidating mass, one minute collectively ferocious, and totally silent the next.

The double threat was such that Tiberius had to send members of the imperial family to deal with it: his son Drusus to Pannonia, and Germanicus, his popular stepson and potential successor, to the Rhine. Drusus was harsh and, with the help of a convenient lunar eclipse that

scared the gullible soldiers, soon restored order. Germanicus first tried emotional blackmail, and when the men repented he let them take responsibility for punishing the guilty. A bloodbath followed. Here we can see foreshadowing of the savage civil wars of A.D. 69–70 that ensued after Nero's death, and to which the *Annals* would have led up (unfortunately parts of the work, including the last section, have not survived).

Tacitus: a biased report

Tacitus' description of the mutinies is detailed and vivid, but he was writing around one hundred years afterwards. There is no reason to doubt his basic narrative, but he probably took specific details from other reports of similar events, as was usual amongst ancient historians. Moreover, it is likely that his account is biased in some ways: he has chosen to be quite condemnatory of the mutineers. He says that the 'better men' stayed aloof, and then condescendingly portrays how the eclipse frightened the Pannonian army. Although he reports the soldiers' complaints in some detail and does not consider their leaders blameless, he stresses their violent and irrational behaviour. The slaughter with which the Rhine mutiny ended was permitted by Germanicus, but it was on the men's own initiative.

So Tacitus seems not to have sympathized with the legionaries. Instead, he has taken a disapproving superior's perspective. He may himself have commanded a legion as part of his *cursus honorum*, which perhaps shaped his attitude towards the common soldiers. The sources for his account were probably subject to similar influences: they most likely included the *German Wars* of Pliny the Elder, who served as a cavalry officer. In any case, none of these other works survives. Short of discovering a mutinous legionary's private journal, it is unlikely that we will be able to hear the soldiers' side of the events of A.D. 14.

Modern light on an ancient mutiny

However, what I saw in Paris reminded me of the Roman mutinies in several key respects. Tacitus describes the secret meetings of the mutineers and the informal groupings that they formed, bypassing the army organization and hierarchy. Similarly, the French protestors held unofficial gatherings and then bigger discussions, at which divisions between staff and students were ignored. As I watched that meeting in the street, it was not hard to imagine the speaker as a seditious legionary inciting his comrades to action.

Both the Romans and the French complained about low pay and a lack of

fair and fixed terms for their employment, as well as their superiors' misbehaviour. Tacitus reports how in Pannonia a particularly strict centurion, nicknamed 'Get me another' for his habit of beating his men until the cane broke, was lynched. Fortunately, such violence did not feature in Paris, although threatening slogans and chants aimed at the École's Director indicated the strikers' anger. Meanwhile, the French government's plans to raise the retirement age echoed the legionaries' delayed discharges!

Like Tiberius, the Director did not take on the protestors directly, but sent representatives. Some of them adopted a conciliatory approach, while others were more confrontational, threatening to call in the police. But here the two sets of events diverge. The Roman agitation was ended by Drusus and Germanicus although, as mentioned above, much worse civil conflict would flare up after Nero's death. In Paris, the protests continued in various forms for months.

The Roman mutinies: the untold story

I suggested earlier that Tacitus characterizes the mutinous soldiers as superstitious, violent, and thoughtless. He is probably correct to imply that crowds can behave irrationally. But the Parisian 'mutineers' were generally realistic about their goals, and aware that their best chance of success was good organisation. When the authorities took action, they did not turn on each other but continued protesting and winning support.

We should not assume that the legionaries acted exactly in this way. As the different outcomes to the protests show, the Roman and French movements did not mirror each other in all respects. But given the similarities between the ancient and modern scenarios, what happened in France should encourage us to consider that Tacitus may not have been fair when portraying the soldiers. They might well have been more organized and reasonable than he implies. In this way we can gain a deeper understanding of Tacitus' aims in writing *Annals* 1, and of the historical events that he narrates.

Finally, it is important to point out that the events in Paris are not the only possible contemporary equivalent of Tacitus' mutinies. Both sets of protestors made the sort of demands that are heard at most strikes and left-wing rallies – such as the demonstrations against government policies and cuts that occurred in Britain in the winter of 2010/11. Next time you see reports of a protest in Parliament Square in London, think of Tacitus...

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